

Like Diamonds, these role models
are precious and rare



FRANCIS XAVIER



 Paulines

Childhood

In the early 1500's news of the journey of Christopher Columbus to the New World was spreading. The travels of Vasco da Gama around Africa to the Orient were also well known. It

was an age of expansion, exploration, discovery and conquest.



Navarre was a small town that lies between France and Spain. This was the place where Francis was born during the Holy Week of 1506. He was the youngest of five children, three boys and two girls. One of his sisters would later become a nun with the Poor Clares, and his two brothers would fight for the independence of Navarre.

His parents were both from a noble family. His father was an educated man and even had a doctorate in law. He was president of the royal council and always on errands for his king. This used to keep him away from home. When Francis was nine years old his father died.

Now the mother was alone to bring up her five children. She brought them up in a very religious atmosphere. More so, in the

castle where they lived, there was a chapel and a priest would go there to celebrate mass. It is likely to say that these priests who went to celebrate mass were the ones who gave Francis some education that included the study of Latin.

One day while he was out in the fields playing with other children his mother called out to him;

"Francis, where are you?"

"Mum, I am in the fields playing," he answered.

"Have you forgotten that you have classes to attend?" she asked.

"No, Mum, I am going right away to prepare myself."

"Then hurry up or else you will be late."

Francis hurried to his room and washed his face, dressed and ran out from his room to the study room, which was next to the chapel in the castle.

When Francis was six years old, his country fell to the kingdom of Aragon. Later on the towers of the castle of Xavier were dismantled by the new rulers so that it could no longer serve as a fortress.

When he was older Francis refused to join his two brothers who were among the resistance fighters. Instead, he was much more interested in sports and he showed a talent for athletics and was a good high jumper. In spite of sports he also had ambitions of becoming a distinguished scholar and doctor of philosophy. His family also had great expectations that he would surely become a scholar, by studying in Paris, the famous university in all of Europe.

Life In School

Handsome and well dressed, Francis left the Castle of Xavier for Paris at the age of nineteen and his mother was sad. It seems he never saw her again. Francis passed through the Pyrenees, and either on foot or horse-back he travelled five hundred miles to Paris. He had some idea of becoming a priest, perhaps he would. He thought with his law and philosophical studies, he would be appointed a bishop. He enjoyed the good life in Paris, and although not brilliant, Francis did well in his studies.



The university had many people who came all the way from distant countries in search of knowledge and degrees. Francis enrolled in the recent St Barbara College, where there were many Portuguese and Spanish students. He shared a room with Peter Faber and a more advanced Spanish student of medicine called Juan.

Life in the university was not very smooth. Students had to wake up as early as 5:00 a.m. to start trekking to the next campus where they had their classes. They carried along their big books, ink pots, and candlesticks. They had no break till 10:00 a.m., when they first took a bit of food, after which they would continue reading Latin and Greek authors, then at 1:00 p.m. they began their private studies. Supper was at 6:00 p.m. after which the students would continue to read more difficult Latin and Greek books.

Francis and Peter were very healthy and energetic young men, and the food was never enough for them.

"My God Peter I am very hungry," Francis complained to Peter.

"Even I, the breakfast was very little," Peter said.

"I can't even see or understand what I am reading," he grumbled

"Peter, it is better if I go and lie down on my bed and wait for supper time."

So they both got up and started walking to their hostel.

Nevertheless, for entertainments, there were pageants and public dances, free fights as well as sports. Francis made a name as a first class high-jumper on the athletic field. He was truly proud of himself.

Francis' studies were three and a half years of philosophy in view of obtaining a degree. His mind was not taken up with books and studies, and he just floated along. Francis was not yet prepared for serious things and at times he would join some fellow students who used to sneak out at night for their adventures.

"Hi guy, are you joining us tonight?" one of the boys asked him.

"Oh sure, where are we exploring tonight?" he asked.

"There is a beauty pageant on the next street."

"All right I will be there."

After some time he noticed the diseases these boys were getting as a result of their bad behaviour with women, and he withdrew from them.

Francis kept on demanding money from his family back at home. He wasn't making good use of the money though, it was just to show off on campus. He employed a maid, who was washing his clothes and cleaning their rooms. His family knew of this and wanted to withdraw him from the university but his sister Magdalene refused and said she saw a promise in him.

From time to time, the university students used to find it tough due to the roughness and cruelty of the age. There was a great split that broke out among the people of Europe. It was all about Christians being faithful to their beliefs. It happened that followers of the new doctrines held unto their convictions even when persecuted by the authorities. At times they were condemned to death and publicly executed as a warning for the others. In such situations the students had to be present and some of them even turned the whole affair into a picnic, but still for others it was disgusting.

Francis and Ignatius

A few years later, an older student, Ignatius of Loyola, was assigned to the room of Francis and his companion. He was twice as old as Francis, and quite different in his ideals. The future looked bright for Francis, as he had completed his studies and become a professor at the age of 26. He was intending to take a job as a teacher, so that he would be placed in charge of some of the younger students and he would help them while he continued with his higher studies.



But living with Ignatius was challenging for Francis. Ignatius never ceased to admonish Francis and Peter. He kept asking Francis questions like this:

“What does it profit a man to gain the whole world and suffer the loss of his soul?” Peter Faber was touched by Ignatius and he became a close companion of Ignatius.

Gradually Francis too, was won over. He decided he would work entirely for



the Kingdom of God, serving God and his people.

On 15 August, 1534 a small group, including Ignatius, Francis, and Peter Faber, pronounced religious vows in a church in Montmartre, Paris and the Society of Jesus (Jesuits) was born.

Francis Xavier was ordained at the age of 31 at Venice. Following a thorough 40 days fast and spiritual preparation, he celebrated his first mass.

Ministry in Rome

Francis continued his studies in Paris with the young group of priests. They were the pioneers of the Society of Jesus. They journeyed to Venice and there they did pastoral work, teaching, and working in hospitals. But then their intention was to travel from Venice to the Holy Land and work there for the conversion of Muslims. This was not possible because of the danger involved, it was just impossible to travel to the Holy Land.

Francis went to Bologna, Italy, and there he was known for his preaching. After some time, he took ill, and as a result of his illness he stopped preaching in Bologna.

When the Society of Jesus was officially approved by the Pope, most of the group eventually moved to Rome, because their desire was to be at the service of the Pope.

Francis was also moved from Bologna to Rome where he became secretary to Ignatius. It was in Rome that his life took another turn when a request came from the king of Portugal. The king wanted Ignatius to send two of his brothers to far away India.

Two were chosen. But one became ill, and in his place, Ignatius asked Francis to replace his brother and immediately he responded, "Here I am, I am ready, send me."

Mission to India

Fired with an extra-ordinary zeal, Francis blazed the trail of the Gospel far across the sub-continent of India. He left Rome the next day, and then after months of travelling and waiting, Francis set sail from Lisbon, Portugal, in 1541, on a voyage that would take 13 months. He eventually was to go by himself, without a Jesuit companion. He was the first Jesuit missionary. Sea voyage in those days were far different from the modern ocean liners. On the journey, Francis stopped in Malindi, (East Africa) Mozambique, South Africa, and then proceeded to Goa, India. He would never again see his homeland Spain, neither would he see Ignatius nor Rome again.

Francis in Goa

Immediately upon arrival in India, he started visiting prisons, hospitals and teaching catechism. He set the catechism to music, so that it could be sung, and would be easily remembered. Some say he baptized more than 50,000 Catholics. Interested in good education, he took over and rebuilt the Catholic college at Goa. Yet conversions were not always easy, because of the bad examples so often displayed by the so-called Christian Portuguese traders and sailors.

He once described a fairly typical day:

"Here in Goa, India, I live in the hospital, administering to the sick the sacraments of confession and communion. But besides

the sick, such numbers of other persons want me to hear their confessions, that if I could be in ten different places at once, I should never lack penitents. After attending to the sick, I spend my morning hearing confessions; after midday I used to go to the prisons. When I finished there, I would go to the church of Our Lady near the hospital and there I began to teach the children, as many as three hundred, their prayers, the Creed, and the Ten Commandments."



He translated the prayers into their languages and learnt them by heart. He would recite them slowly so that the people could pray with him. He taught them with such a great zeal that the people of Goa were filled with admiration at the holiness of the law of God. They also expressed the greatest shame of having lived so long in total ignorance of the true and living God.

Exploring the Eastern World

While the work in India progressed well, Francis Xavier wanted to move on and explore other areas of the Far East. He travelled to Ceylon, Indonesia, Malaysia, and then to Japan. He laboured there for more than two years, struggling to learn their difficult language. Even though he had some success in Japan, the unstable political situation there made missionary work very difficult and the cold weather too, produced physical suffering.



While in the Far East, he often thought back to Europe. He saw the great harvest, the need for more missionaries in India, and once wrote this now famous letter to his Jesuit brothers in Rome. He expressed the desire to go around the universities in Europe to stimulate zeal for the missions:

“I often think of visiting the universities all around Europe and particularly the University of Paris and the college of La Sorbonne. There I will shout at the top of my voice like a mad man saying to the students; how I wish they would

work as hard as this as they do at their books, and so settle their account with God for their learning and the talents entrusted to them. This thought will for sure stir most of them to meditate on spiritual realities, to listen more attentively to what God is saying to them. They will forget their own desires, their human affairs, and give themselves entirely to God's will and his choice. They will say: 'I am ready, O my Lord: what do you wish me to do?' Send me anywhere at your will and pleasure, even to India, if that be for the greater good of all."

He rejoiced when he heard news from Europe, news that took more than one year to arrive in India. He constantly acknowledged his need for prayers, prayers that would give him strength in the many troubles he faced. He wrote to Ignatius saying, "I consider that God has been pleased to deliver me from all these toils and dangers, chiefly because your prayers and fatherly intercessions on my behalf induced him to favour me."

He constantly remembered his Jesuit brothers in his own Masses and prayers. In fact he explained that he cut their signatures off the letters they sent him, in order to carry their names with him, together with his own written profession of his Jesuit vows.

Francis Xavier was a man of prayer. He needed much prayer to keep strong amid such trying circumstances. He gave practical advice to all Christians, that they should recollect themselves twice each day, in the morning as they awake, and in the evening before rest. He used to say this:

"Before you retire to rest at night, never fail to examine your conscience, reviewing your thoughts, words, and actions of the day, noticing the offences you have committed against God as minutely as if you were going to confess them. Then beg pardon of the divine majesty, make a purpose of amendment and recite an "Our Father or a Hail Mary."

Being a zealous missionary, his eyes were set on China because it was called "The Celestial Empire" and he judged it to be the key to the East. If he could succeed there, Christianity

would have a solid hold in the East, yet it was dangerous or even forbidden to enter China. He searched for ways to reach China, enlisting the aid of a boat captain to transport him there. He wrote in the last letter of his life that "the voyage will be most painful. It is full of a thousand dangers, and full of terrors. How it will turn out, I know not, but I have firm confidence and a strong inward assurance that however things may go, the result will be good."

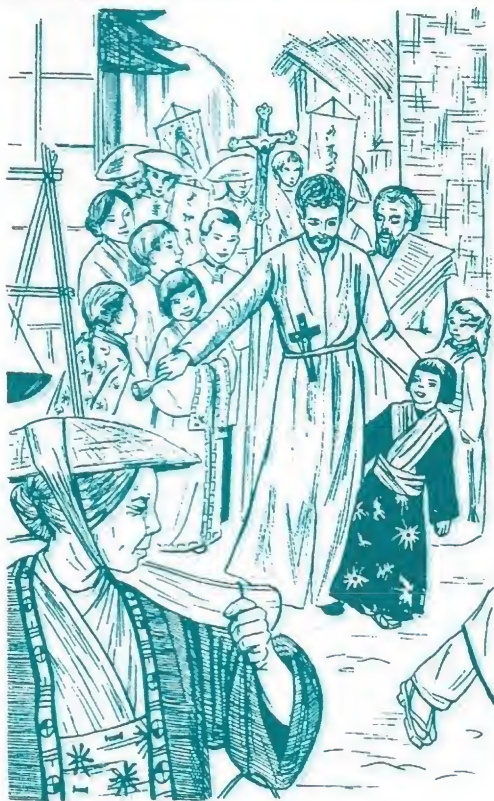
Island of San Chan

Francis, on his way to China, reached the port of San Chan, which was 120 miles from Canton. They disembarked there and a little hut was made for him. He used to celebrate mass there,

until the day he fell sick. But by God's grace he was restored to health.

On this island he would hear confessions, appease quarrels and do many other things. There were a good number of merchants who would come to San Chan for business. He asked if he could be helped to go to Canton but they all refused. They did not want to lose their lives and properties to the governor of the town.

Nevertheless, Francis met an honest Cantonese merchant who was willing to





help but with an agreement of getting 200 gold pieces from him. He promised to take him in a little vessel, which was to carry no one else, but his sons and a few faithful slaves. In case the governor of the town heard of the affair, he wouldn't know the crew who took him to Canton. He also promised that Francis would stay in his house for three days, and then at dawn one day he would take him to the town gate and show him the road leading to the government

house. Then he would go to the governor's house and tell him that he had come to announce the Gospel to the people of China. He would show him the letter from the Bishop of Goa that was addressed to the monarch.

Yet it was not in the providence of God that Francis should reach China. The boat that was to take him never arrived. He died of fever on a small island six miles distant from Mainland China on 3rd December, 1552, while waiting for permission to enter China. Within weeks his body was disinterred and found to be incorrupt. He was finally buried at the scene of his first labour, Goa. He was 46 years old when he died. Eleven of these years were spent in mission.

He was canonized in 1622, and was proclaimed patron of all Catholic missions by Pope St Pius X. Why? With St Paul, St

Francis Xavier is probably the most renowned of all missionaries. Like St Paul, he could say, "Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel" (1 Cor 9:16). He suffered many disappointments and frustrations in his mission work, and yet he continued on with hope and energy. There was the difficulty of not knowing the local languages. But he said that "the poor let me know their needs without an interpreter and I understand them without an interpreter when I see them."

All Christians, by our baptism are called to be apostles and missionaries. Even if we do not go to other countries, we can spread the good news of Jesus by our good example and words. This begins in our home and family, but then it extends out to our neighbours and friends. We pray to St Francis Xavier to have that same zeal and desire to share the good news as he had.

Favourite Prayer of St Francis Xavier

O God, the everlasting Creator of all things, remember that the souls of the unbelievers have been created by you and formed in your own image and likeness. Remember that your Son Jesus endured a most painful death for their salvation. Permit not; I beseech you, Lord, that your Son should be any longer despised by unbelievers. But be appeased by the prayer of saintly men and women and of the Church, the spouse of your Most Holy Son, and be mindful of your mercy. Forget their idolatry and unbelief and bring it about that they too may someday acknowledge him whom you have sent, Jesus Christ, your Son, our Lord, who is our salvation, our life and resurrection, by whom we have been saved and delivered, to whom be glory for endless ages. Amen.

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